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Bob Kuechenberg, 71, Dies; Gritty Guard With Champion Dolphins

By **Daniel E. Slotnik**

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Bob Kuechenberg, a six-time Pro Bowl guard in the National Football League, two-time Super Bowl champion and member of the only N.F.L. team to achieve a perfect season, the 1972 Miami Dolphins, died on Saturday at his home in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. He was 71.

His former wife, Marilyn Nix Kuechenberg, said the cause was a heart attack.

Kuechenberg joined the Dolphins as a free agent in 1970, the future Hall of Fame coach Don Shula's first season, and played for them until 1983. He was part of a daunting offensive line that included guard Larry Little and center Jim Langer, both enshrined in the Hall of Fame.

The New York Times sportswriter Red Smith quoted Kuechenberg in 1975 on his strategy for neutralizing defenders, in this case the Chicago Bears tackle Wally Chambers. "I just fight him," Kuechenberg said. "As long as he's beating on my head and not the quarterback's, it's all right with me."

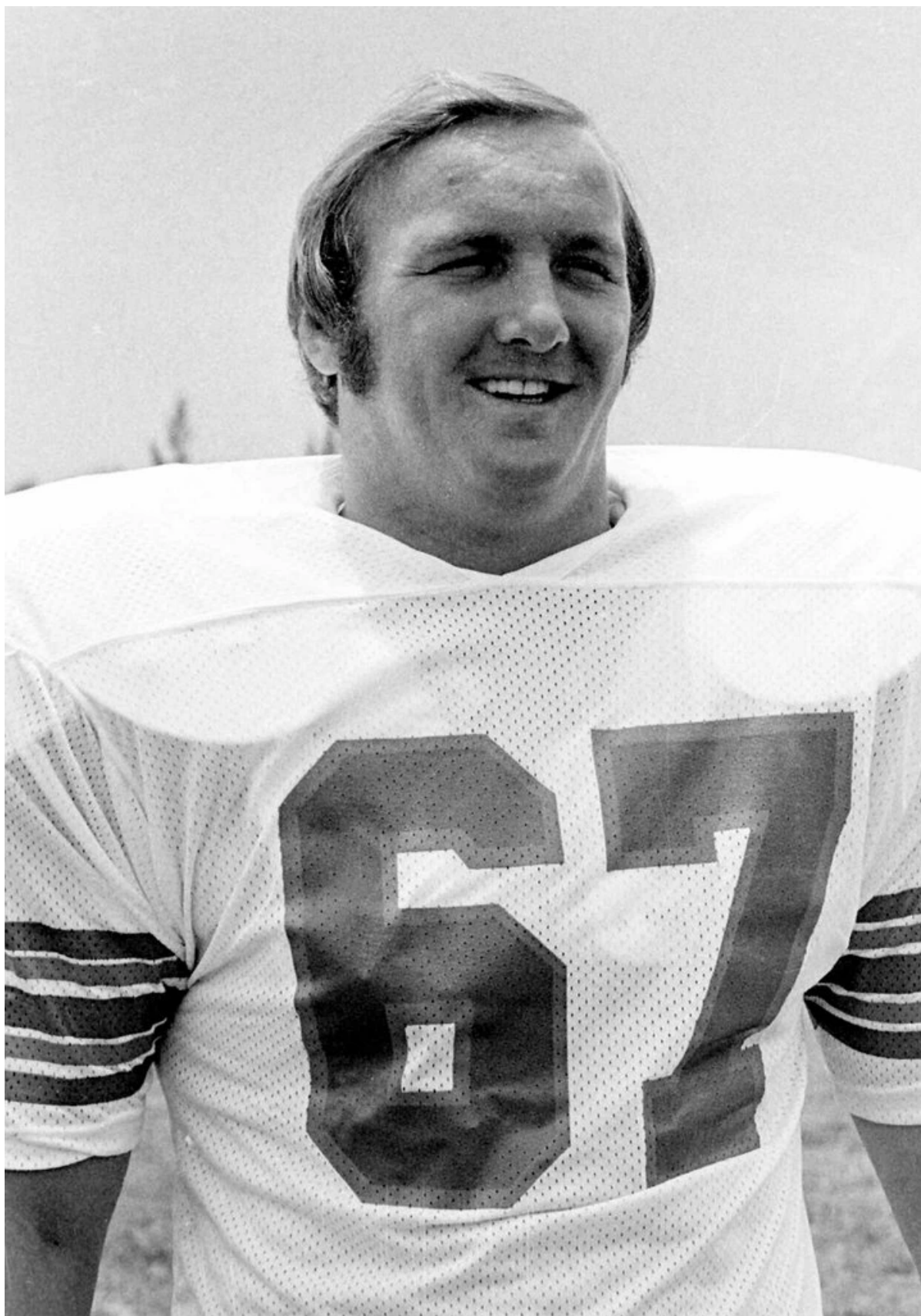
Kuechenberg (pronounced KOOCH-en-berg) started every game for the 1972 Dolphins, who went 17-0, beating the Washington Redskins, 14-7, in Super Bowl VII at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. He started 16 games during the 1973 season and playoffs when the Dolphins repeated as champions, blowing out the Minnesota Vikings, 24-7, in the Super Bowl at Rice Stadium in Houston.

The Dolphins overcame the vaunted Vikings defense, known as the Purple People Eaters, on the ground — the Dolphins' quarterback, Bob Griese, attempted only seven passes — in no small part because of Kuechenberg's work up front against Alan Page, the Vikings' Hall of Fame defensive tackle.

In a statement after Kuechenberg's death, Shula said his performance in Super Bowl VIII "was one of the keys to our victory."

Kuechenberg was tough, even for an N.F.L. offensive lineman. He played with a fractured forearm in the Dolphins' second Super Bowl victory, completed a game against the Pittsburgh Steelers with a broken ankle and played much of the 1977 season with two fractured bones in his back.

An eye injury ended Kuechenberg's career after the 1983 season, during which he blocked for the rookie quarterback Dan Marino.



Kuechenberg in 1973. He played in 16 games that season as the Dolphins advanced to a second consecutive Super Bowl victory. Jack Kanthal/Associated Press

Kuechenberg played in 196 games with Miami, a team record that was later broken by Marino.

“He gave you everything he had every single snap, and that dependability extended throughout his career, missing only a few games during that time,” Shula said.

Robert John Kuechenberg was born on Oct. 14, 1947, in Gary, Ind., to Rudy and Marion Kuechenberg. He told The Palm Beach Post in 2005 that his father had been an iron worker, middleweight boxer, rodeo clown and human cannonball.

He grew up in Hobart, Ind., and graduated from Hobart High School in 1965 before studying economics and playing football at the University of Notre Dame.

Kuechenberg told The Palm Beach Post that his father (“the toughest guy I have ever known”) had motivated him to play through pain.

“I’m the only one that I know of who made it in the N.F.L. whose father accused me of being a pussycat for taking the easy way out,” Kuechenberg said, referring to his college education and football career. “He basically said, ‘Either graduate from Notre Dame or get in the cannon.’”

“So a broken arm? That’s no big deal.”

He earned a bachelor’s degree in 1969 and was chosen by the Philadelphia Eagles in the fourth round of the N.F.L. draft. But he was released by the Eagles and then the Atlanta Falcons in his first season, which he finished with the Chicago Owls of the Continental Football League before joining the Dolphins.

He married his high school sweetheart while he was at Notre Dame. They later divorced.

After retiring from the N.F.L., Kuechenberg ran fine arts and luxury real estate businesses. He also renovated houses in Florida with Ms. Nix Kuechenberg, whom he married in the early 1970s; one restoration was of a historic multimillion-dollar mansion on Star Island in Miami Beach. That marriage ended in divorce, as did his two subsequent ones.

His survivors include two children from his first marriage, Bryan and Eric; two from his second marriage, Nicholas and Alexandra Kuechenberg; one from his third marriage, Brandon; two grandchildren; and six siblings.

Kuechenberg was a repeat finalist for the Hall of Fame, in Canton, Ohio, but has not been elected to it.

“I’ve coached a lot of Hall of Fame players, including a number of offensive linemen, and Kooch was as good as any of them,” Shula said. “I hope one day he gets that ultimate recognition by being enshrined in Canton. It’s an honor long overdue.”

The Associated Press contributed reporting.

Follow Daniel E. Slotnik on Twitter: @dsloolik

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